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### WORLD POPULATION CRISIS: THE AMERICAN ROLE

*The following was adapted from an address by Ambassador Marshall Green, Coordinator of Population Affairs, to the Cleveland Council on World Affairs, Cleveland, Ohio.*

#### Dimensions of the Crisis

The world population passed the four billion mark in March 1976, according to the Population Reference Bureau. It took from the dawn of time until the year 1830 to reach the one billion mark. A hundred years later in 1930 we were two billion; 30 years later in 1960, three billion; and today we are four billion. It now looks as though we will reach five billion in 1987 and six billion in 1997. Longer range projections of population at current growth rates produce horrendous results.

The world population crisis has been generated not by any general rise in birth rates around the world, but rather through a sharp drop in death rates. Thus one of mankind's greatest successes—a massive reduction in death rates over the past century due largely to scientific and technological advances—has paradoxically provided the seeds of what could be mankind's greatest disaster: excessive population growth. There seems to be a general, widespread awareness of this fact, but not enough action.

There is a certain intractability about the population problem that defies analogy with any other issue on the world's agenda. Environmental pollution, for example, smarts our eyes, fouls our rivers and lakes, creates health hazards. We are accordingly compelled to take immediate action—even legal action. The arms race and nuclear buildup involve massive risks that demand the immediate attention

of world leaders and entail enormous costs that fall directly on taxpayers who react.

But the population explosion? It can't even be heard. Yet every day it produces a net increase of 200,000 inhabitants on this limited planet.

Too many people still see population as someone else's problem, not their own—or something that we can think about tomorrow, for today there are too many other issues demanding our full attention. Such procrastination can only lead to disaster for us all, wherever we may live.

**Impact on Food Supplies.** Perhaps the most recognizable challenge of rapid population growth will be whether there will be enough food in the years ahead, particularly for poorer nations which are not now self-sufficient in food production. What will be the fate of those countries as population presses increasingly against the limits of available land, water, and agricultural capital as well as other resources? Some demographers believe that today between 10 and 20 million people die annually from causes directly or indirectly related to undernourishment. World food reserves are at their lowest levels in years. Fish stocks and catches have peaked and are now declining.

Yet population growth entails ever-growing demands for food. Whether or not these demands can be met will depend not only on increasing food production but also on success in limiting population growth. Unless the developing countries can do this, their annual import requirements of cereals will exceed 100 million tons by the end of the century. Apart from the question of whether developing countries could pay for such levels of food imports, there is the question of whether such

levels would be available for export. Much of the world is increasingly dependent on the United States and Canada—one geographic-climatic zone—for food imports. North American grain exports for 1976 are estimated at 100 million tons, but most of these exports go to Europe and Japan. So how can anticipated food demands be met in the decades ahead? Only through increasing worldwide food production and lowering population reproduction.

**Impact on Environment.** No doubt the main cause for global pollution has been industrialization and rising living standards. It is thus the developed, not the developing, countries which have been the principal polluters. But in the developing countries, efforts to increase food production for growing numbers of people often result in deforestation and floods, the overgrazing of land and the advancing of deserts, and the encroachment of expanding urban areas on former food-producing land.

**Social, Political Impact.** Less evident are the social, political, and strategic consequences of excessive population growth. Today migration from rural areas to cities is often a disruptive factor in developing societies. The current surge of humanity into already overcrowded cities overtaxes social, educational, and sanitary services and contributes to urban unemployment, juvenile delinquency, crime, and social unrest. The latter often translates into political difficulties resulting either in chronically weak and therefore politically unstable regimes or increasingly authoritarian governments. Friction and even wars between nations have often been marked by population pressures, and we now live in a world where nuclear weapons are proliferating.

**Impact on Economic Development.** Many developing nations argue that the key solution to reducing population growth rates is economic development, and it is true that economic development has usually—but not always—been attended by drops in birth rates. On the other hand, population growth rates in many countries make it all the more difficult for those nations to achieve their economic goals.

Rapid population growth has an adverse effect on almost every aspect of economic and social progress. Specifically, it:

- Lowers per capita GNP growth rates;

- Absorbs large amounts of resources needed for more productive investment in development;
- Increases the income disparity between rich and poor;
- Reduces family savings and domestic investment;
- Absorbs large amounts of scarce foreign exchange for food imports (or the loss of food surpluses for export); and
- Intensifies unemployment and underemployment in many developing countries where not enough productive jobs are created to absorb the annual increments in the labor force.

Virtually all countries have population problems of sorts and the United States is no exception. Fortunately, there has been a drop in the U.S. birth rate to parallel the drop in the death rate so that our rate of increase is now only about .7 percent. But we do have distribution problems so that some areas, particularly our larger cities, are showing strains in providing government services to an increasing number of people within limited budgets, have serious pollution problems, and seem increasingly threatened by crime. We also face some increasingly serious issues created by the rapidly growing populations of countries to the south of our own. Yet our interest is focused most sharply on the population problem around the world for the many ways in which it will affect the entire planet.

### The U.S. Role

Perhaps we spend too much time dwelling on the magnitude of the population problem and not enough time focusing on the real question: What can be done about it? One of the first steps has been the establishment of an Interagency Task Force on Population Policy, headed by Ambassador Marshall Green, the Department of State's Coordinator of Population Affairs. This task force, which includes representatives of 16 U.S. Government agencies, has international—not national—responsibilities. Its creation exemplifies our concern with worldwide population issues.

It would be dangerously simplistic to suggest that the many problems such as food shortages, environmental deterioration, static economic development, social unrest, and political extremism can be solved by controlling population growth alone. There are many other issues that must be taken

into account, but population problems are deeply involved in them all.

The U.S. approach to world population issues is based on mutuality of concerns and respect for the rights and responsibilities of other countries in developing their own policies and programs. Every country faces somewhat different problems whose solutions must accommodate to the realities, peculiarities, and circumstances of that particular country.

We cannot solve the problems of Asia or Africa or Latin America. We can, however, help the problem solvers of Asia or Africa or Latin America. They are the ones who must take the lead, speak up clearly, and commit adequately of their own resources in dealing with their problems. We stand ready to help.

We also recognize that there is no single solution, no simple solution, and no short-term solution to the population problem. It is one that calls for the combined talents of scientists, economists, doctors, educators, government workers, and private voluntary organizations. Above all, it calls for a greater involvement of leaders and diplomats than there has been over the past several decades.

The stage has at long last been set for more effective action by the nations of the world. One hundred and thirty-six nations agreed in late 1974 at the World Population Conference in Bucharest on a "World Population Plan of Action" which calls upon nations to establish population policies and to recognize the right of every man and woman to plan the size of their families and to have the means for doing so. In short family planning has gained worldwide acceptance.

Today many countries have drawn up sound population policies and programs. Family planning has enlisted the active support of many leaders and a great many dedicated people, especially women working as doctors, demographers, midwives, motivators, as activists in family planning associations, and above all, as mothers. Knowledge of family planning is widespread, and means of contraception are ever more widely available, although they have not yet come within reach of most people in the more remote rural areas. As a result of these developments, there has been a gradual lowering of both birth rates and death rates in many countries and an actual decrease in population growth rates in some countries.

Success or failure in dealing with excessive

population growth lies, in the last analysis, with decisions and actions taken by the individual. What motivates the individual to have as many children as he or she has? What does family planning mean to the poor man or woman who sees many sons as the only road to old-age security? How do educational levels impact on the problem? To what extent do better health and nutrition, especially of children, tend to reduce fertility rates? All these items and many other factors will have a direct or indirect bearing on the individual decision.

Thus, our general contributions to social and economic development will, at this most basic level, have a salutary impact on the population problem, quite apart from their other virtues or advantages. But we also know that overall development is not likely to proceed fast enough to have a decisive effect on slowing population growth. Indeed economic growth is sometimes not sufficient to keep up with growing population with the result that per capita standards of living decline instead of improve.

The United States, accordingly, welcomes moves that are being undertaken in many countries to integrate family planning with health and nutrition. People are far more receptive to this approach which is not only humane but also cost-effective in the long run, since all three—health, family planning, and nutrition—can be served by one administrative structure, with doctors and especially other health workers in a position to perform all three services.

The United States also welcomes movements in many countries of the world to strengthen the local communities—usually the village—and to create within that village a spirit of social and economic cooperation. Among many other advantages, family planning has better chances of success when it is rooted in community life and when people can see within their own visible horizons how limiting family size improves health and economic prospects for everyone in that community.

The very permanence of the community is an important consideration. National governments come and go. Individuals come and go. But communities go on forever. Population programs must continue for many years to take real effect. A solid community organization also provides effective means for group involvement, as well as for making family planning services locally available and for monitoring and encouraging their use.

We recognize the great importance of increased efforts in the fields of biomedical and population sciences research. We will continue carefully to coordinate our efforts with those of other nations and international organizations with a view to finding family planning methods that are safe, widely acceptable, and do not depend excessively on expensive medical structures. Because safe testing takes years to complete and because the population problem is so acute, what is achieved in the near future is going to have far more beneficial results than that which is achieved several years later.

In the long run, what we and other donors can do to be of help will be minimal compared to what a country does to help itself. Obviously, we cannot give support unless such support is requested. Types and amounts of support must then be determined on the basis of need and effective utilization, as well as what the assisted country is doing to help itself.

The U.S. population assistance has totaled over \$800 million in the past 10 years, reaching a high of \$125 million in FY 1973, decreasing to \$110 million in FY 1975. We aim to reverse this downward trend this fiscal year, although Congress will have the final decision. We are seeking to

encourage other donor nations and international organizations to be more generous; and they are likely to do more if we do more, as indeed we should in terms of this critically important world issue. Other donor nations—for example Sweden, Norway, Japan, the United Kingdom, Netherlands, Canada, the Federal Republic of Germany, and Denmark—have increased their funding of population assistance in 1974 and 1975, and almost all of these countries plan increases again in 1976. Additionally, this year there are several new donor countries in family planning. We see this increasingly as an undertaking that requires the combined efforts and contributions of many countries and even greater involvement and support for the U.N. Fund for Population Activities, the World Health Organization, the U.N. Development Program, the U.N. Children's Fund, the World Bank and the regional banks, as well as private groups like the International Planned Parenthood Federation and the Population Council.

It so happens that countries facing the gravest population issues are the ones most in need of help, not just in family planning, but also in food, agriculture, education, health, and development generally. For those who want our help and deserve it, we must not be found wanting. We all have too much at stake to do otherwise.

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